



Recurrent Errors in the French-English Translations of Undergrad Students in the University of Bangui

Clotaire Ngaba Beboy^{1*}, Stephen Ambe Mfortheh¹

¹University of Yaounde I, Cameroon

*Corresponding Author

Clotaire Ngaba Beboy
University of Yaounde I,
Cameroon

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Abstract: While translation is indispensable in multi-lingual contexts, translation from French to English continues to pose a serious problem to students of translation in the University of Bangui. This study was designed to identify first year students' errors in their translation from French to English in order to suggest areas where adjustments can be made to improve on their proficiencies and translation skills. From the analysis of 186 learners' French-English translations, we identified 2250 inter language errors which were mostly in the use of the continuous aspects, tense concords and subject omission. Consequently, we proposed that while focus could be made to help the learners avoid the deviations, it is imperative to get them to understand more acceptable alternatives to enhance their proficiencies and French-English translation skills.

Keywords: French, English, translation, Undergrad students, University of Bangui.

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INTRODUCTION

Fundamental insights about language are valuable to any student or teacher. As Langacker (1973:3) states, "it is a radical mistake to assume that the nature of language is self-evident or that we know all about a language just because we speak it". Consequently, the fact of speaking two or more languages does not necessarily make somebody a good translator; there is a lot more to it. It requires a mastery of the source and target languages, knowledge of the material concerned and an understanding of the author's message. The adoption of a new language is often followed by the gradual adoption of a new culture. This is perhaps the case of the Central African Republic undergraduate students who study English as a Foreign, Second or Third Language, with the French language which is the official one and Sango, their national language. Arguably, undergraduate students' (in the University of Bangui) poor performances in translation can be due to the non-

mastery of semantic and syntactic structures of both languages (French and English) or the influence of their national and official languages, French and "Sango" respectively.

The linguistic situation in Central African Republic is complex. While English is studied as a foreign language, French and Sango (mother tongue) are used as the official languages of the country. This makes translation from French to English and vice versa, among undergraduate students in the University of Bangui, quite challenging. In the Central African educational system, translation courses are generally included in the teaching curricula at the University level, especially in the Department of Modern Languages, so that learners of English could master the norms of word structures, grammar and vocabulary in order to practice oral and written communication in the source and the target languages (French and English). Observably, the students have various

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difficulties in the use of language. This study is designed to describe some of the linguistic deviations in their translation of texts from French to English.

Translations and Implications

The word "translation" is derived from the Latin word "translatus", which comes from "trans" and "fero" and together meaning "to carry across" or "to bring across". (Webster's New World Dictionary). Consequently, to translate is defined as "to change (words) into another language". Many experts propose their definitions about "translation". Catford (1965:20) says that translation maybe defined as the replacement of textual material in another language (target language). Another definition is stated by New mark (1981:7) According to him translation is a craft consisting of the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language. His definition is obviously better and clearer than the one given by Catford (ibid). However, he regards translation only as a craft, while translation is surely not only a craft, but also an art and science. Nida and Taber (1969:21) give another point to be considered in translation: they explain that translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message; firstly, in terms of meaning and secondly, in terms of style.

Translation, therefore, comprises of the interpretation of the meaning of a text into one Language. The Source text (ST) is translated in a new, equivalent text, the Target text (TT), or translation. Translation is also an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another. It can be defined in terms of sameness of meaning across languages.

Translation must also be dynamically equivalent. In other words, it is to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message and the receptors in the source language (Nida and Taber, 1969). Dynamic equivalence is a good translation that the form is restructured (different syntax and lexicon) to preserve the same meaning. Good translation focuses on the meaning or context, and aims to preserve that intact. So, accuracy is needed. It is to be judged in this light; certainly the dynamic equivalent translation is not only made meaningful to the receptors but also more accurate (Nida and Taber, 1969). Translation is a process of finding a target language (TL) equivalent for a source language (SL) utterance. Translation consists in reproducing the receptor

language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (Nida, 1969:1). Then it is a creative process, which always lends the translators freedom of choice between several approximately equivalent possibilities of realizing situational meaning (Levy: 1967). It is also called transference of context. Translation is the transference of the context of the text from one language into another, bearing in mind that one cannot always describe the content from the form (Forster:1958).

As for Tou (1998:10), the translation process is an activity globally involving the process of discovering the meaning of the given text through the re-expression of meaning in a form of a new text. According to Tou (op.cit), there are four main stages to be followed by translators in order to move from the meaning of the source into the target: i.e. the analysis of the meaning, the discovery of meaning; the transfer of meaning; and the re-expression of meaning of the source into the target. In the translation process, the first thing to do is to understand the total meaning of the source text. To do this, one can conceive through the language itself as one of the meaning-making systems which have three levels of coding the meaning, wording, and sounding or writing. In addition to those three strata of the language, it is necessary to go beyond the aspects of the language which have to be related to the higher level of the meaning-making systems. In the transfer stage, the translator transfers the discovered meaning into his/her mind from the source into the receptor language. Finally, in the stage of re-expression of the meaning, the translator actualizes in the target language what he or she has in mind.

METHODOLOGY

186 Level One students of the Department of English, University of Bangui, were given texts in English translate to French and later a text in French to translate to English. Essentially, the English and French texts were simply translation. The text was made up of 113 words. This limitation was very important for the effective analysis of the learners' errors. The errors were later classified and analysed in relation to other contact languages.

Analysis

Essentially, most of the errors the learners made were due negative transfer from indigenous and French languages to English. For purposes of better analysis, we present all the errors identified but limit our analysis to the most recurrent ones. The following table presents the classification and recurrence of errors in students' translation.

Table 1: Classification of Learners' Errors in Translation

| No. | Types of errors | No. of errors | Percentage % |
|-----|--|---------------|---------------|
| 1 | subject omission | 278 | 12.36 |
| 2 | misuse of the progressive aspect | 352 | 15.64 |
| 3 | confusion between present perfect and past tense | 326 | 14.49 |
| 4 | sequence of tenses | 295 | 13.11 |
| 5 | if clauses | 98 | 4.36 |
| 6 | words order | 80 | 3.56 |
| 7 | misuse of uncountable nouns | 70 | 3.11 |
| 8 | misuse of prepositions | 154 | 6.84 |
| 9 | double negation | 60 | 2.67 |
| 10 | misuse of indefinite articles | 64 | 2.84 |
| 11 | misuse of definite articles | 58 | 2.58 |
| 12 | omissions | 29 | 1.29 |
| 13 | lexical confusion (distortion of meanings) | 100 | 4.44 |
| 14 | English phrasal verbs | 35 | 1.56 |
| 15 | English reflexives pronouns | 28 | 1.24 |
| 16 | English gerunds | 55 | 2.44 |
| 17 | English adjectives | 100 | 4.44 |
| 18 | English spellings | 45 | 2 |
| 19 | English punctuations | 23 | 1.02 |
| | Total number of errors | 2250 | 100.00 |

From the above table, we realize that the most frequent interlanguage errors include the misuse of the continuous aspects (15.64%), tense concords of the indicative moods (14.49%), and omission of the subject (12.36%). Many translated sentences show that undergraduate students do not master the appropriate usage of tenses. Another series of errors resulting from the negative transfer of linguistic structures from L1/ L2 to FL are wrong words order (3.56%), misuse of countable and uncountable nouns (3.11 and 6.84%), lexical

confusion (4.44%), English adjectives (4.44%), English gerunds (2.44%) the mistranslation of English phrasal verbs (1.56%), misuse of prepositions (6.84%), double negation (2.67%), definite and indefinite articles (2.84 and 2.58%), and so on. For purposes of this study, therefore, we shall focus on some of the errors.

The Use of Progressive Aspect, and Past Tenses

The use of tenses was troublesome or confusing for undergraduate learners.

Table 2

| Students' level | Error code types | Examples | Frequency of occurrence | Source/cause |
|----------------------|------------------|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 st year | GPA/GVT | -Beatrice <i>has</i> pregnant.....She <i>lose</i> a friend. -.....since she has <i>leaved</i> the house. | 3 | Intra-language |
| Sophomores | | -But your Christ <i>didn't</i> he a Jew? -During days and nights, the wind- <i>blown</i> , the snow <i>fell</i> | 3 | Intra-language Inter-language |
| 3 rd year | | -It was two years since he <i>married</i> -While you were playing....I <i>writes</i> | 2 | Intra-language |

The students who produced the examples above made several errors when using progressive aspect and the past tense of verbs. It showed that undergraduate students still have problems in using FL structures especially intra-language errors:

- Instead of the verb 'to have' it should be 'to be' in the past as in 'she was pregnant' and;
- 'lose' become 'lost' in the preterit/past, as in 'she lost a....', and 'has leaved' should be 'has left';

- the auxiliary 'didn't' should be 'wasn't', the verb 'blown' should be 'was blowing', and the verb 'fell' should be 'was falling' in the past.

Another point that drew our attention is the misuse of the past perfect with 'since' and the English irregular verbs by the third-year students.

- The verb 'married' should be 'had married' and 'write' should be in the past 'wrote'. By the end of the whole analyses, it was found

that the progressive aspect (GCA) error occurs 352 times and present perfect and past tenses (GVT) occurs 326 times with intra and inter-language sources.

The Use of the Definite Articles (the) and the Indefinite Articles (a/an)

The use of articles was then subcategorised in two: omission and addition.

Table 3

| Students' level | Errors code | Examples | Frequency of occurrence | Source/cause |
|----------------------|-------------|--|-------------------------|---|
| 1 st year | GDA/GIA | article omitted -O.A.U summit,.... | 2 | Intra-language |
| | | article omitted - The newspapers and..... tea was brought. | | |
| Sophomores | | - An incident at <i>a</i> station. - But your Christ was not he <i>the</i> Jew? | 2 | Intra-language |
| 3 rd year | | - <i>The</i> American student in Paris. | 2 | Intra-language and Inter-language(L1/L2-FL) |
| | | article added - He sings <i>a</i> old songs. | | |

In the brief example above, it was found that the student still made errors in article omission 'the'. For instance, the proper noun should be preceded by the article 'the', as in:

- a) '.....O.A.U summit' should be 'The O.A.U summit' for it belongs to definite noun. Meanwhile, the students omitted the article 'the', it reflects their inability to use FL structure or called intra-language error.

The second error is related to the wrong articles used in the following sentences:

- b) 'An incident at *a* station.'; and
- c) 'But your Christ was not he *the* Jew? It should be the definite article 'the' for the first sentence giving 'An incident at the station' and the indefinite article 'a' for the second as in 'But your Christ was not he *a* Jew?';

Another case of wrong use of definite article appears in the following example:

- d) '*The* American student in Paris'. This sentence should be used with the indefinite article 'an' since a vowel was in front as in

'An American student in Paris'. The last example of error concerns the article addition,

- e) Since 'songs' is in the plural form there is no need to use an article, so it should be, 'He sings old songs'.

The source of this error is attributed to inter-language error (L1/L2 with FL). The grammar rule of words plural formation of the L1 and L2 is quite different from that of the FL.

Then, by the end of all the analysis it was found that article errors occurred 64 times for indefinite articles and 58 times for the definite one with inter and intra-language error sources.

The Use of Prepositions

A preposition (such as at, by, far, in, of, on, to, with etc...) is a word used with a noun, pronoun or 'ing' form to indicate the relationship between the subject and the object of a sentence. The table below show that undergraduate students still encounter problems with prepositions use.

Table 4: error in preposition use

| Students' level | Error code | Errors form | Frequency of occurrence | Source/cause |
|----------------------|------------|--|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1 st year | Gprep | - Food shortage <i>at</i> Africa. - <i>At</i> the twentieth day the doctor authorized..... | | Intra-language |
| Sophomores | | - An incident <i>in</i> the station. - Some years ago I arrived <i>to</i> the Gare St Lazare... | | Intra-language |
| 3 rd year | | -An American student <i>to</i> Paris. -She wanted to get married <i>of</i> me. | | Intra-language |

Errors in preposition use (GPREP) are also depicted in undergraduate writings. Prepositions still constitute an obstacle for reliable translations.

For instance, in the first example a student confused two prepositions 'in' and 'at', so instead of,

- a) 'Food shortage *in* Africa', he wrote 'Food shortage *at* Africa'; and

- b) Instead of 'At the twentieth day.....', it should be 'On the twentieth day.....'.

Broadly speaking, we can use 'in' for the names of land-areas (town, cities, states, countries etc..). Other examples of error in preposition use can be found in the following sentences,

- c) 'An incident *in* the station', it should be 'An incident *at* the station.', and
d) 'Some years ago I arrived *to* the Gare St Lazare...' should be 'Some years ago I arrived *at* the Gare St Lazare...'. The preposition 'at' is also used for specific addresses. The last example of error,
e) 'An American student *to* Paris', should be An American student *in* Paris. 'She wanted to get married *of* me' should be 'She wanted to get married *to* me'.

By the end we realized that errors in prepositions (GPREP) used occurred 154 times with intra-language and inter-language sources. We must remember that intra-language errors occur mainly when the students do not yet master the grammatical structures of the foreign or L2. The next coming chapter will be devoted to inter-language interference of the L1 (Sango) vis à vis of the foreign language (English) as far as translation is concerned.

DISCUSSION

Apart from the types of errors that we have discussed up to now, two instances need special attention, namely the misuse of the continuous aspects and the confusion between the present perfect and past tenses. All the errors we have analysed so far revealed that in the case of poor performance in English as well as in French languages, the lexical and grammatical structures of L1/ L2/FL influence the generation of errors in L2/L1/EFL to a great extent. Nevertheless, we discovered various instances of omissions and lexical confusions, which are linked to a higher or poor degree of language acquisition. As such, we consider that some basic causes of error production in those translation scripts under discussion were determined by the students' failure to consolidate the linguistic structure of either the source or the target language. As to the intralingual and developmental errors, they can be divided into two categories. The first one comprises the errors that are generally caused by students' tendency to hypercorrectness or overgeneralization, such as the redundant use of the ending "s" and the presence of the double subject or object.

The second category, which is the most comprehensive one, includes the errors that are generally determined by the superficial acquisition of the target language. The examples illustrating it

are various, ranging from wrong verbal structures, confusion between stative and dynamic verbs and misuse of the infinitives or gerunds to misplaced negation in compound verbs.

If the errors are shown so far imply the linguistic relation between English and French, either in the form of a positive or negative transfer, there are other causes of errors that are manifested in the tests of the undergraduate students who learn or master more than one language. We have often noticed that undergraduate students tend to produce more errors from French-English than vice-versa. This can be explained by the higher degree of interference among languages, students also acquiring lexical and grammatical patterns specific to English, which in its turn, becomes a source of errors. Such examples are illustrated in their translation scripts by adding the "s" ending to the English adjectives according to the agreement between adjectives and nouns common in French and by adding the "e" ending specific to the first group of singular regular verbs in French to the first or third person singular in English. All types of errors that we discussed above indeed constitute the base of error production, but there are also minor cases that should be taken into consideration too, such as punctuations, spelling errors, or errors due to students' lack of attention or tiredness, a phenomenon which does not plead for students' weak acquisition of L2/FL, but uncontrolled external or psychological factors.

The errors found in this analysis might have been caused by several factors. The most logical one is that the students' L1 is Sango; L2 is the French language while the English language is foreign to them. The use of progressive aspects and tense errors occurred several times. Those errors are mostly caused by intra-language errors and inter-language errors. These syntactic errors occurred because the students lack proficiency in grammar particularly in conjugation and irregular verbs. Yet, writing English verbs were demanded to be practiced more by the students, since the tense agreement in L1 and L2 seems to be quite different from that of the English language. The use of article errors was sub-categorized into the type of article whether addition or omission. These final results showed that the students had not completely mastered using articles in the English language. Interference from L1 in this type of syntactic error happened for; the function of the article uses in Sango language even in French does not match with that of the English language. Moreover, in L1 number or subject does not affect the verb.

Similarly, preposition related errors were quite recurrent. The number of errors that occurred

was caused by inter-language errors and intra-language errors. Meanwhile, it was a huge number of errors found in 186 students' writing results. Differences in the structure of L1, L2, and the English language might have been causing the occurrences of those errors. Eventually, with the objective of the study, it was found that the most predominant syntactic errors fell into the progressive aspect, verb tenses and the use of articles, followed by the use of Subject-verb agreement respectively. The most influencing errors were caused by the intra-language and inter-language sources (L1 and L2 interference). Clearly, by seeing through these findings, some pedagogical remediation related to syntax and grammar is necessary.

CONCLUSION

The remediation is carried out to be the step of overcoming the findings of this study; therefore errors can be avoided in the future. This step can be beneficial for, the students as the language learner, the lecturer as the classroom learning mediator and facilitator, the course and syllabus designer, and the other researchers who work in the language field. Firstly, about the results of the article use error analysis, it is suggested for the students to learn more about the function of the article in a sentence. Therefore, the students need to understand when they need to omit the unnecessary article, and in what condition they need to add a necessary article, or even when to use no articles at all. Reading more about the theory of English articles and part of speech may improve students' knowledge. Practicing more to write or read about English text stories, poems, movie scripts, songs, and any other printed mediums may challenge students to be more aware of articles errors. The lecturer may provide them with a more complete medium of learning and an exact method to teach articles.

Secondly, due to the errors of preposition use, the students are required to have more understanding in using prepositions. They have to learn to use the prepositions in a different type of clause, for each preposition has its function in a different clause context. The lecturer may ask the students to do some practice in using prepositions directly when the students want to deal with two or more clauses at one time, so they could avoid redundancy in using prepositions.

Finally, on the error of progressive aspect and tenses use, the students need to be consistent on the tenses form being used. For instance, when a student writes a text composition by using past tense form, apparently the next sentence fragment should be written by using past tense form as well. However, learn more about the use of subject-verb

agreement can be started by memorizing verb changes, English irregular verbs as well. Then, they may go one step further to use it in daily conversations or tasks. They also need to practice it in writing sections. Facing this kind of error, it is suggested to the lecturer to give facilitations and proper medium for learning subject-verb agreement, such as giving the proper course design and upgrading the method of teaching subject-verb agreement. By applying this consistency, hopefully, can help students to avoid making tense agreement errors. The number agreement errors can be avoided if the students completely understand the verb changing form depending on the singular or plural subject. Thus, it is suggested that the students work more on the understanding of number agreement and focus on the number case of the subject. Due to the findings that the error is caused mostly by intra-language errors, thus, the students are required to be even more serious in learning and practicing English grammar, whether in writing or speaking skills. Another very important aspect that needs to be the focus on, is the employment of adverbs of tenses or duration, we mean 'since, for, ago'. It is therefore assumed that the syntactic error made by the students was caused by two major sources, intra-language error, and inter-language error. By seeing at these problematic areas, the researcher has suggested taking out several related pedagogical remediations to the students.

In addition, the researcher recommends the students keep reading books related to English grammar and genre-based writing.

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